

New Relations and New Concepts Focusing on the Internet Influence upon Chinese Contemporary Literature

Ying WANG

*Associate Professor, Research Fellow of Institute of literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing
100732, China.*

ABSTRACT: *Since the end of last century when the network literature took its initial prototype in China to today's its immense popularity, the Internet has had increasingly prominent influence over multi-leveled aspects such as the way of reading, the readers' psychology, and the popular culture. The changes it has brought to literature; the reforms it has brought to multi-relationships among the public, the literature, and the society; as well as the brand new concept of reading and the cultural spirit of "amusing oneself to death" have exerted enormous impact on and subversion for the traditional literature. Assisted by the network literature, the new rises, relationships and concepts have been continuously mass-produced and disseminated on the new media technology platform and on the condition of network communication means, all of which have produced timely and wide impact on the contemporary Chinese literature and have become a literary existence that cannot be ignored. This powerful rising of network literature has eliminated the original boundary between the classics and the popular literature, expanded the social impact of literature, and brought about development of literary industry, which has certain positive function on and important influence over the expansion of literary territory and reconstruction of literary patterns. But at the same time, this rise has also brought new problems and challenges. Thus, how to propose effective solutions and actively respond to the challenges in the face of this new regular type of literature and new cultural phenomenon has become a topic that should be deeply explored.*

Keywords: *Network literature Chinese contemporary literature Rise Relation Concept*

I. Introduction Of Author

I. The New Rise

Ever since the publication of the world famous Hispanic sociology scholar Manuel Custer's *The Rise of the Network Society -- the Information Age Trilogy: Economy, Society and Culture (Volume 1)* in the last century, it has indicated that great changes brought by the information technology, especially the dramatic changes brought by the development of the network technology have entered the global research vision. From then on, the social, cultural and psychological transformation research produced by the new technology and economic civilization began to flourish and grow. Compared with Europe and America, the Chinese network development was a bit lagging behind. But in the recent 20 years, it has exerted great influence over China, and the rise of network literature has become the most outstanding representation of this influence.

As a new medium, the network became a new means of literature in 1988 when it was just beginning to take shape and was to be developed. With Cai Zhiheng's (under the pseudonym "Ruffian Cai") serial novel from Taiwan *My First Intimate Contact* being the landmark event, he launched his novels belonging to the network itself, making literature enter a brand new mode of publication, advocacy, and promotion. From then on, the concept of network fiction and its discourse sample began to appear frequently in the vision of general public and network literature formally drew up its brilliantly developing curtain.

Since network got involved in literature, there has been a trend of writing and transmitting moving ahead together. From 1997-1998, Mainland China's first literary website -- "Below Banyan" was established in Shanghai. With this website's debut, there appeared the early Internet writers such as Li Xunhuan, Xing Yusen, Ning Caishen, Anne Baby, etc. Later in 1999, the first Chinese poetry website "Boundaries" was officially launched. Since then, a variety of literary websites, including those of fiction and poetry, literary forums, and blogs, were created in great number like the bamboo shoots after a spring rain. Working in their unique way, the network media started network literature's new and difficult start-up stage.

After the year 2003 of the new century, Qi Dian Chinese Network (www.qidian.com) was the first to launch its reader-oriented network WIP plan, trying to establish the business model of paying for what one reads, attracting powerful writers and affecting a lot more readers. This close linking between literature and commerce not only attracted a large number of willing network novel writers to join in, but also changed the awkward economic situation of literary websites from burning money blindly to self-sustaining and profits-making, to ascertain their better survival and development. The establishment and perfection of this new "production - consumption" commercial chain greatly stimulated the rapid development of network literature, giving birth to a large number of writers with an annual salary of 100,000 or 1,000,000 yuan. Because of this, the condition that

network novels had to rely on the print publication was reversed. Many network novels were adapted into high rating movies and became the main source of movie adaptation. Because many network novels were hotly pursued and abnormally popular “on line,” they also became the target of the competitive print publishers.

The state of network literature being poised for take-off lasted for a period of time until 2008 when Royal Literature Company claimed its foundation, which started the new age of full copyright operation and multimedia operation. Royal Literature Company used qidian.com as its fulcrum, integrating Hongxiutianxiang Network, Jinjiang Original Network and other well-known literary websites and high-quality cyber sources. It implemented a variety of operations such as writing, transmitting, adapting and publishing; opened up the “chain” of full copyright management in the network literature; and facilitated the network literature to enter a new era of comprehensive rise and new development. In addition to the full copyright operation, another important feature of network literature in recent years is the change brought by “mobile Internet” and new media. By the end of 2013, the rate of using mobile phone terminal application software for downloading network literature had reached 46.5%. The continuous development of new media and technology brought new changes to network literature. At the same time, the widely used new media such as micro-blog and micro message moved beyond the stereotyped network novels and opened up a completely different style of literature. Network literature moved from its original static mode into a dynamic existence. And the economic profit created by network literature is also rising rapidly, doubling every year. According to the data provided by “China’s Annual Report” (2013 -- 2014), after the setting up of mobile Internet reading platform in 2010, “the direct revenue of net literature almost doubled every year and quickly jumped up to 6 billion from the original less than 1 billion”.¹

From 1998 to 2014, the network literature went through 16 years of its birth and development course. These 16 years of network literature have not only written their own developmental history, but have also changed the overall developmental outlook of the total literature. All of this has gone beyond people’s experience and their original expectations. It is just this independent breed, the strong development and extension in the breed that have made the new network into a broad platform; which not only becomes the incubator of network novels and literature, but also becomes a high leverage to the whole literary world and the literature.

Apparently what the network brings to literature seems no more than the network novels, blog writings and the great number of literary websites serving as platforms for network literature, but in fact, it has also brought the new type of literary relations and new concepts of literature. While adding the new element and new vigor to the overall literature, it also brings new charges and challenges. A brief combing of all these new phenomena will make us see easily what network brings to literature is almost a huge change that shakes the world or a deep upheaval with revolutionary features.

II. New Relations

Literature is the accessory of life and the sensor of society. Because of this, ever since the new times, along with the changes of life, society, especially with the deep upheaval of cultural environment, literature has been closely related to politics and economy in different periods of life, showing different developing trends and features of times. On the whole, before network became involved with literature, what led and affected literature was mainly two tides: politics and economy. Literature and politics, literature and economy were the two basic relations that had respectively guided the dominant literature of the 80’s and 90’s of the previous century.

After the network got involved with literature, the two basic relations still exist. But what is unquestionable is that the main relations and the basic forces that dominate and affect the whole literature have become: network technology, network media, and network production, which bring about a whole series of new elements and produce a whole series of new relations. To sum up simply, among these new relations, the most influential ones are: literature and network, literature and industry. These two new relations have constituted the basic force and the main kinetic energy that dominate and affect network literature and the literature as a whole.

By nature, the relation between literature and network media is actually the relation between literature and new type media as well as its transmitting mode. The spontaneous, instant, extensive and universal features of network transmission are entirely different from the old way of transmission, in which the traditional literature relied on literary journals and books’ publishing. The lagging behind of traditional literature’s dissemination, the limitation of the reader, as well as the isolation of the author and the reader have all been broken down so as to make the transmission and writing synchronized and make the interaction with the reader a process of truth passing and sharing, in which writing, transmitting and reading are not only synchronized, but also existed as a trinity.

Speaking of net literature, we can find co-presence of the author and the reader, the close interaction between reading and writing, which has become the basic pattern of network literature activity and its way to exist. The degree of the work’s’ reception and the size of the author’s effect were gradually selected through this marathon-like reading and writing interaction and finally the winner was found. In this process, the reader is no longer the receiver, but a participant and a critic. It is just in this close interaction and deep involvement that the

network literary writers and readers are working hand in hand, respecting each other and growing together. Their relations gradually grow into that of “Idol” and “Fans”, and the idol with the most fans will outstand themselves as the “Big God” in various types of writings. And those non-Big God writers are also nurturing their fans in this process, constituting their own human relations, realizing their own big or small literary dreams. By using the entirely new method of maximizing its transmission through the net media to attract readers, the network literature disseminates itself by relying on creations in technology and life. This has opened up a brand new space for cultural market and literary life and that is: writing “on the net” and transmission “on line” are becoming more popular and more fashionable ways of dissemination day by day. This has dwarfed the traditional writing “off net” and transmission “off line.” Therefore, focusing on “net” and intervening with “online” have not only become the targets that must be reached by the literary and cultural industry work units, but also the aspects that traditional writers begin to attend to. Thus, while making use of network tradition, in terms of writing and transmitting, the traditional literature has also made the rising literature and network transmission a necessary place for its own growth and a motive force for its development.

The relationship between literature and industry is the result of the evolution from the relationship between literature and economy, which is another important new relationship brought by the network to literature. Different from the traditional literature in the 90’s, which faced rapid attacks from economic tides, the network literature relying on the network platform has rapidly and powerfully developed with the two wheels of net technology and capital investment, in which we see the network and business have been inextricably involved.

Both the prosperity of network novels and the profit of literary web sites benefited from the online payment system that was implemented in 2003. Although 2-3 cents per thousand words were inconspicuous, the payment for reading by the massive readers not only brings the net novelists quite generous income, but also enables the literary sites to accumulate much capital by sharing this ratio.

Having tasted sweetness, the network literature operators see a bright future of the marriage between literature and commerce. After 2008, holding the belief of gaining power and growth in the merger and integration, The Realistic Grand Game Company established Royal Literature Company and thus built the “aircraft carrier” in the network literature domain. Later, the Internet giants like Tencent and Baidu joined the network literature enterprise one after another, setting up their own literary creation nets such as How Cool Literature Net, 91 Panda Books, Stragglers and Disbanded Soldiers’ Literary Website, which were eventually integrated into several groups of network literature. Meanwhile, relying on their advantages of sources and platform, these groups all started their copy right operation of network literature, making the network literature form its whole processing chain and chains’ production line which include paper copyright, digital copyright, wireless electronic copyright and movie, game adaptation. The mutual discovering and leveraging among net literature, commerce and industry have realized the intrinsic combination of their perfect blending.

The maximum effect of the new relationship between network literature and cultural industry on traditional literature is to first promote traditional literary periodicals to develop in the direction of digitalization, and on the second it facilitates the traditional literature to move toward industrialized publishing. Besides the paper formed subscriptions and retailing, the past literary periodicals had hardly any other forms; but today’s literary journals not only run the electronic versions, but also use micro-blogs and micro message public numbers to face more audience of network literature. With the paper book as its main form of publishing, the traditional literary publication gradually increases the variety and quantity of electronic publication, making digital publication just as dignified as print publication and having realized the benign interaction and well-coordinated development between the “off line” publications and the “online” publications. This fine cooperation has moved publication onto a new step stone and won some new space for the development of publishing industry.

III. New Concepts

What network brings to literature is not only the new forms but also the new relations, behind which there are also new perspectives on and new concepts of literature. This common phenomenon normally regarded as laws or standards in the net literary activity is something much deeper and more important. After many years of experiment and practice, some basic types and modes of network literature production were largely stabilized and formed the rules to use in reality. In the process of establishing these types and modes, some literary concepts unique to the network literature have also formed a certain paradigm, which exerts widespread influence, and thus brings in fresh nutrients to the contemporary literature. But at the same time, it has also brought some new and strange concepts such as entertainment first principle in literary writing, readers’ priority in literary transmission, and profit focus in literature operation, etc. There are many differences between network literature and traditional literature, but the biggest difference lies in the pursuit of entertainment, which is much a higher goal than the pursuit of its aesthetic value. Because of pursuit of readability and maximizing readership, “小白文 Xiao Baiwen (translated as ‘the white paper’ referring to a kind of popular writing that is easy to read and shallow in meaning)”, which suits the taste of the general public, came into being. This content-simple and easy writing, which just tells a fascinating story in plain text style, is an essentially effort of

appealing to the most ordinary readers and pleasing the largest audience. The story told by the “white paper” is either fantasy or god like knight-errant, either the harem or time crossing, either tomb robbing or thrillers, either mysteries or suspense, which are basically well-known for the writers’ talents in weaving altogether the mysterious, the absurd, the strange, and the abnormal in order to delight the curious and stimulation seeking readers. The literariness in this kind of writing is certainly decided by the writer’s literary attainments, but its total and utmost goal is to entertain the writer himself as well as others. In this regard, one statement made by Uncle No. 3 of Southern Style (NanPaiSanshu), who is good at tomb robbing type writing, was quite clear and that is “network novels without the purpose of entertainment are rescuing their readers.” Although his comments sound a bit extreme, it really reveals some truth. Placing emphasis on the entertainment, network literature has established its self-supporting basis and its space for further development. In some sense, it has become more secularized and less literary. This long or short, giving or taking, advantages or disadvantages will come out subsequently in the later development.

Another difference from traditional literature is that network literature transmission cares more about its readers and even regards its readers as the utmost priority. In the traditional literary domain, what most writers really cared about, in terms of writer-reader relationship, was the like-minded exchanges and equally responsive communications; not just pursuing wide readership and popular readership. But the network literature is different in this sense. Its writers normally wish that while satisfying readers with similar interests, they can also attract more readers with different interests. Thus, to the writers the readers are their friends, kinships, market and the God. The larger the number, the better; the longer the time they follow, the better. Some network writers do not mind whether there are commentators reviewing their works, nor do they care whether they can get any rewards. And just for this reason, they only put the readers’ likes and supports in the first place throughout their writing career. As some reviewers point out, we should reflect over the network literature creation rule that “readers are the God.” In viewing the relationship between literature and reading, we cannot only testify the work’s value from the perspectives of literature consumption and literature market; rather we should weigh the sense and impact of our writings by observing from the angles of literary enlightenment, literary inheritance, cultural accumulation, and cultural construction.² This opinion really deserves network literary writers’ attention and serious consideration. From writing to transmitting, from production to operation, network literature has placed more emphasis on economic profit and direct benefit. Although this is different from the traditional literature that stresses “social benefit comes first and economic benefit, second;” following the principle of entertainment first, it is not a practice deserving blame. But in recent years, some phenomena have shown that network literature has oriented greatly toward economic benefit and this trend really deserves people’s attention. In the year of 2013, apart from the past practices such as users’ payment for reading, advertising, and fans’ economy, network literature used “prop rewards” as a new way of operation; by deeply exploring “fans’ economy”, it sought the new profit point of network literature. In the eighth session of the rich writers’ list, network literature writers’ income generally exceeds that of the traditional ones, becoming the most eye-catching group among the rich writers. In the process of network literature’s seeking development and opening up its industry, there definitely exists the tendency of over-emphasizing commerce and always strengthening industry. Looking at the current development trend, we can see that interest and capital seem to have become the main lever and important force to support and promote the network literature; network writing has become a way to make money for people from different sectors; and network writers have become the tools for money making on the network literature interest chain. All these effort has ignored the aesthetic and social functions that literature should have. From a long term point of view, whether to the network literature itself or to the whole body of contemporary literature this is extremely harmful. On the whole, in the Chinese contemporary literary altar, network literature keeps its massive production and transmission by basing itself on the new platform of information technology and new transmitting media. With its timely and widely impact and influence, network literature has become a literary existence that cannot be ignored. Viewed from its number of employment, its size of industry and its social impact, network literature has rapidly developed geometrically. From the ecological view of literature and culture, the strong rise of network literature has eliminated the original boundary between classics and popular literature, expanded literature’s social impact, and promoted literary industry development. In extending the literary domain and restructuring literary patterns, network literature has played positive and significant functions. But as a new literary genre, it has undoubtedly brought about many problems and new challenges. In the face of this literary and cultural phenomenon that has become a normal practice in literary circles, we need to go near it and track it so as to understand its situation, discover its problems, propose effective measures, and actively respond to the challenges.

Notes:

1. See Bai Ye, editor of *Chinese Literature Blue Book: Annual report (2013 -- 2014)*, Social Sciences Academic Press, May 2014, page 152.
2. See *People's Daily ·Overseas edition*, February 18, 2014.